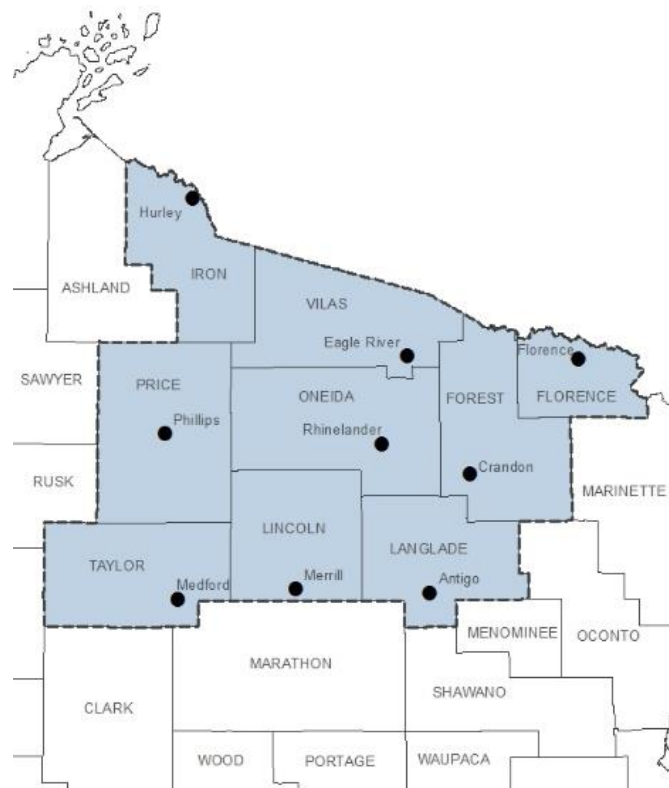




# Recreation Opportunities Analysis



## NORTHWOODS REGION



# 1. NORTHWOODS REGION

## BACKGROUND

### *LANDSCAPE SETTING*

The Northwoods Region is located in the north-central part of the state and encompasses Florence, Forest, Iron, Langlade, Lincoln, Oneida, Price, Taylor, and Vilas counties (Map A). The region is composed primarily of the North Central Forest and Northern Highlands ecological landscapes. Studded with thousands of mostly small kettle lakes, this area epitomizes for many residents the image of “up north.”

In the center of this region is an enormous concentration of lakes resulting from the pitted outwash plain left by glaciers and is believed to be the third highest concentration of lakes in the world. The area’s other key characteristic is its forests (Map B2). The vast northern hardwood forests that support a variety of wildlife, including many that need large blocks of habitat to survive like elk, wolves, bear, bobcats, and pine martens. Several large wetlands, small creeks, rivers, and small kettle lakes occur throughout. Many large wetlands are associated with the kettle lakes and streams. This type of landscape offers opportunities to manage large blocks of forest land for species adapted to predominantly un-fragmented landscapes.

Many of the state’s major rivers, such as the Flambeau, Wisconsin, Wolf, Peshtigo, and Brule-Menominee rivers, originate in the Northwoods Region. The exceptional water quality and aquatic diversity of these rivers is a result of the heavily forested landscape.

### *LOCAL ECONOMY*

Tourism is an important—and growing—segment of the region’s economy. This is due, in large part, to the increasing numbers of visitors from southern Wisconsin and Illinois who make use of the Northwoods environment. With its numerous high-quality lakes and rivers, the region supports a large number of water-based recreation opportunities. In addition, the abundance of public lands—predominantly national, state, and county forests—provide visitors with the ability to find “wilderness” experiences. The influx of visitors, along with a growing population of baby boomers retiring to the region, supports a significant portion of local businesses resulting from the ample outdoor recreation opportunities.

Land use in the uplands is largely oriented towards timber and pulp production. This area has enough public land to manage a broad scale “shifting mosaic” of forests—that is, forests at a variety of successional stages, with different age structures and species compositions, in different patch sizes. This diversity provides a firm foundation for the timber industry for generations to come.

There is only a limited amount of agriculture in the area, mainly small farms. Some of the wetlands in this area are used for cranberry production. In the southern-most areas of the region, agriculture is more abundant where more suitable and fertile soils exist.

### *RECREATION USES AND PARTICIPATION*

Given the thousands of lakes, streams, and flowages here, it is not surprising that many boaters, paddlers, and fishing enthusiasts are attracted from around the Midwest. For example, the 220,000-acre Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest offers a variety of recreation opportunities, now drawing over 2 million visitors a year to swim, hike, camp, boat, fish, or just watch the sunset across a lake. In addition to the water features in the region, the large amount of public land helps to make the region a very popular vacation and outdoor recreation destination. The uplands draw hunters, wildlife watchers, snowmobile and ATV riders, off road bikers, skiers, and horseback riders. Additional opportunities for backpacking, canoe camping, and rustic tent camping in the more remote, large blocks of public land could be pursued. Trails of many types are in demand here. Long distance and single day “loop” trails, both on rail corridors that connect small towns, as well as trails in more challenging and varied terrain.

Recreation participation rates for Wisconsin residents as a whole were presented on page 14 of the Introduction. Participation rates of Northwoods Region residents are generally similar to participation rates of the state's overall population. The table at right lists the activities that residents of the nine-counties comprising the Northwoods Region participate in more or less frequently than the state average.

## EXISTING RECREATION SUPPLY IN THE NORTHWOODS REGION

### *PUBLIC LANDS FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION*

The Northwoods Region has the largest amount of public land (2,180,000 acres) of any of the eight planning regions in Wisconsin and the highest percentage of land in public ownership (39%) (Map B1). This has enabled not only a broad spectrum of existing opportunities, but it also allows opportunities to accommodate activities that require large land bases. This section briefly describes the public conservation and recreation lands in the Northwoods Region. A description of all public lands in Wisconsin is provided in Appendix 3.

#### *a) Federal*

The National Forest Service owns and manages just over 800,000 acres in the Northwoods Region as part of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF). The CNNF is managed for multiple uses including forest production, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, water quality and fisheries habitat, and wilderness areas.

No other federal agencies own public recreation land in the region.

#### *b) State*

The Department of Natural Resources owns 480,000 acres and holds public access easements on 135,000 acres in the Northwoods Region. State properties in the region span the range of intended recreational settings and development levels (Map B3). At one end of the spectrum are properties such as Council Grounds State Park that include intensive recreation settings with developed campgrounds, swimming beaches, and picnic sites. Several parts of the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest also support intensive use areas.

At the other end of the spectrum are properties specifically acquired to protect high-quality native plant communities and rare species. Although these types of properties can provide some limited recreation opportunities for low-impact activities such as hunting, bird watching, and nature study, their primary purpose is not necessarily to provide recreation opportunities requiring development or infrastructure.

The State Board of Commissioners of Public Land owns about 67,000 acres in the region. These lands are scattered throughout the region in tracts typically several hundred acres or smaller in size. The BCPL manages its lands primarily for forest products. Many of the BCPL lands are isolated or contain wetlands and generally have limited recreation potential.

#### *c) County*

The nine counties in the region have enrolled a total of 688,000 acres as part of the County Forest program. These lands provide a variety of benefits including forest products, fisheries and wildlife habitat, many types of outdoor recreation, and water quality protection. County Forests range in size from Iron County's 172,000 acres to Forest County's 12,000 acres. The County Forests in the region are heavily used by local residents

#### **Activities that residents of the Northwoods Region participate in at higher rates than the state average:**

- 4-WD vehicle driving on trails/routes
- ATV/UTV riding on trails/routes
- Cross-country skiing
- Driving for pleasure
- Fishing - ice
- Fishing - lake, from a boat/canoe/kayak
- Fishing - lake, from shore or a pier
- Fishing - river, from a boat/canoe/kayak
- Hunting - big game on private land
- Hunting - big game on public land
- Hunting - small game on private land
- Hunting - small game on public land
- Motor boating (including pontoon boats)
- Snowmobiling
- Snowshoeing
- Stream/river fishing from shore/wading
- Target firearms shooting outdoors

#### **Activities that residents of the Northwoods Region participate in at lower rates than the state average:**

- Attending outdoor festival or music event
- Attending outdoor sporting event
- Bicycling on roads
- Swimming in outdoor community pools
- Visiting a dog park
- Visiting a nature center

and visitors from outside the region for a variety of motorized and non-motorized trail activities, hunting and fishing, and other recreation pursuits.

Many counties also manage parks – sometimes nested within the County Forests, sometimes separate properties – that provide campgrounds, boat launches and other types of infrastructure to support recreation.

*d) Other*

Many cities, villages and townships in the Northwoods Region own and manage parks, boat access sites, and other properties that provide opportunities for outdoor recreation. Given their easy proximity to many citizens, although these properties tend to be small they are typically well used. In addition, several school forests in the region are open to some forms of recreation, generally when they are not in use by school and community groups.

## ***PRIVATE LANDS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION***

This section summarizes the privately-owned lands in the region that are open to the public for some types of recreation. A more detailed description of private lands in Wisconsin open to the public is provided in Appendix 3.

*a) Forest Legacy program easements*

Approximately 125,000 acres in the region are part of the Forest Legacy program, which is designed to identify and protect environmentally important private forestlands threatened with conversion to non-forest uses (such as subdivision for residential or commercial development). To help maintain the integrity and traditional uses of private forestlands, the Forest Legacy Program promotes the use of conservation easements.

*b) Managed Forest Law (MFL) and Forest Crop Law enrolled lands*

The amount of land enrolled in these forestry programs varies considerably across the Northwoods Region. Approximately 570,000 acres in the region are currently enrolled in these programs. Because these programs use 25 or 50-year contracts, the total amount enrolled changes from year to year as landowners enroll lands into the program (only the MFL program is open to enrollment) and contracts covering other lands expire.

*c) Land trusts*

Three land trusts operate exclusively in the Northwoods Region: Northwoods Land Trust, Northeast Wisconsin Land Trust, and North Central Conservancy Trust. These non-profit conservation organizations have protected over 10,000 acres in the region. Most of these lands are open to the public for some forms of recreation such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, snowshoeing and other similar activities.

*d) Snowmobile Trails on Private Lands*

The state snowmobile trail network has been developed through the work of local clubs partnering with private landowners. Agreements with willing landowners allow trails to be located for the winter season, which enables snowmobilers to travel throughout the network. There are 4,433 miles of snowmobile trail in the Northwoods region, of which 73% (3,249 miles) are on private lands.

## ***EXISTING PUBLIC RECREATION INFRASTRUCTURE***

The department contacted representatives from county governments and regional organizations to gather information about the recreation opportunities available to the public across the Northwoods. In addition, department staff searched websites for additional data and descriptions of the recreation opportunities provided. Maps C and D show existing recreation infrastructure in the nine counties of the region.

The Northwoods Region contains many large public land holdings, notably the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and the nine County Forests. These properties provide a wide range of high-quality recreation opportunities. What follows are examples of infrastructure in the Northwoods Region that support a variety of recreation activities.

*a) Northern Highland American Legion State Forest:*

- Bike trails: 50+ miles paved, 50+ miles off road and mountain bike
- Cross-country skiing: 65+ miles groomed trails
- Hiking and nature trails
- Horseback riding on open forest roads
- 18 campgrounds, 1000+ campsites
- 8 picnic/day use areas
- 9 swimming beaches
- 100+ boat access sites
- 3 shooting ranges
- Hunting, fishing and trapping opportunities
- Nature study, photography, wildlife watching opportunities

*b) Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area and Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area*

- Water access campgrounds
- Snowmobile and ATV trails
- Hiking, cross country skiing and snowshoeing
- Hunting, fishing and trapping opportunities
- Nature study, photography, wildlife watching opportunities

*c) State Wildlife and Fishery Areas*

- Hunting, fishing and trapping opportunities
- Hiking, nature study, photography, wildlife watching opportunities

*d) Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest*

- 490+ miles of non-motorized trails
  - 20 ski trails
  - 49 hiking trails
  - 4 horse trails
  - 56 hunter walking trails
  - 6 bike trail loops
- Three motorized trail networks
  - Flambeau
  - Perkinstown
  - Dead Horse Run
- 500+ miles of snowmobile trails
- Hunting, fishing and trapping opportunities
- Nature study, photography, wildlife watching opportunities

*e) County Forests (selected examples)*

- Florence: 150+ miles of ATV/UTV trails
- Forest: 50+ miles state-funded ATV trails
- Iron: 25+ miles cross-country ski trails, 12+ miles of the North Country Trail, 100+ miles of year-round ATV/UTV trails
- Langlade: 40 miles bike trails, 100 miles of ATV/UTV trails
- Lincoln: 20+ miles equestrian trails
- Oneida: 35 miles cross-country ski trails, 200 miles woodland trails open to motorized recreation
- Price: 50+ miles hunter walking trails, 75+ miles ATV trails
- Taylor: 65 miles of the Ice Age Trail
- Vilas: 90 miles of hunting, hiking and skiing trails, 100+ miles preferred ATV/UTV system

## PUBLIC INPUT ON RECREATION NEEDS IN THE NORTHWOODS REGION

### *INPUT GATHERED AS PART OF THE ROA.*

The department hosted three public open house meetings in Arbor Vitae, Park Falls, and Antigo on April 25, 26, and 27, 2017, respectively. These open houses were designed to both present information about the ROA and to gather public input on the types of recreation activities they pursued, what places they liked to visit (and what attributes drew them to these properties), and what additional opportunities they wished were available in the Northwoods Region.

In addition to these open houses, the department posted an online public input form on its web page. A downloadable version was also available for people who preferred to print, fill out, and send in the form. The public input period ran from April 10 to May 6. The department sent out information and press releases about the ROA project and encouraged people to share their perspectives through the online or hardcopy public input forms. Recreation groups, non-profit organizations, and others distributed links to the input form to their members.<sup>1</sup>

The department received comments in the following formats:

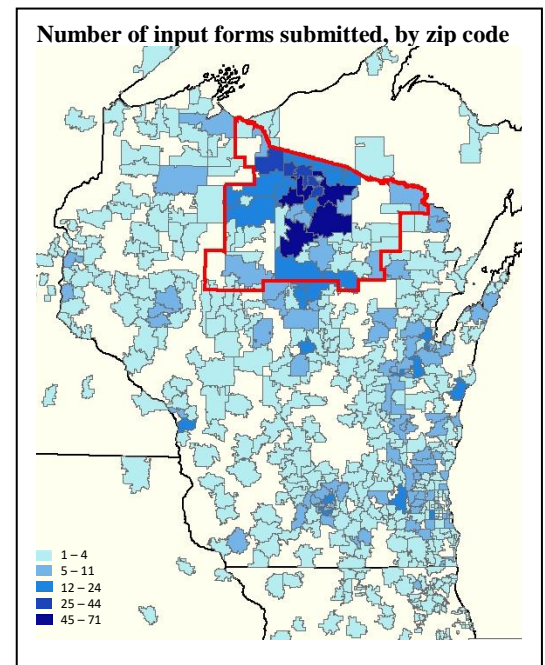
- 2,553 online public input forms
- 109 paper copies of the public input form
- 17 letters and emails

**It is important for readers to keep in mind that the public input received through the ROA process is simply information gathered at one point in time, using an open-access technique. It is not a representation of what the “average” resident believes or the range of perspectives that exist.**

Respondents were asked to list the zip code of their primary residence. Of those who provided this information, the map at right shows their distribution and frequency. As can be seen, the primary residence of many people who provided input is within the nine-county Northwoods Region.

As can also be seen, many respondents live outside the region (about 60%). Undoubtedly, this reflects the large number of seasonal homes and the extent to which the region is a destination for vacationers. It also likely reflects the efforts of groups and organizations encouraging their members throughout the state and Midwest to complete the input form.

As is clear from the number and variety of the comments received, the Northwoods Region plays an important role in the state’s outdoor recreation system. The region has drawn vacationers since the state’s earliest days and has been a family destination for generations. There is a keen interest by many permanent and seasonal residents to



<sup>1</sup> The public input form was available for anyone to complete and about 2,650 people did so. The department’s experience is that when it provides “open access” opportunities in which anyone can participate, the people that respond tend to be those that find out about the input opportunity and to have a particular or active interest in a specific issue; that is, they care enough about an issue to take the time to find and fill out the form or write an email or letter. The responses received are valuable in providing the department with an understanding of people’s perspectives, reasoning, and breadth of viewpoints. However, because there is no “defined population” from which these responses originate, from a statistical perspective there is no way to know how the respondents compare to a larger population (for example, how the 2,650 respondents compare to the population of the nine-county region or the state as a whole) and therefore no way that the results can be generalized with an associated error margin to a larger population.

maintain the existing “feel” of the region. The department received comments, perspectives and ideas on the following topics.

## Participation in outdoor recreation

Not surprisingly, respondents to the public input form participate in many outdoor recreation activities. Popular activities that were listed are seen in the table at right. These results are similar to the participation results from the recent Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) survey. The **bolded** activities in the table at right were the most popular activities that the SCORP survey indicated residents in the Northwoods Region participate in. As can be seen, the activities that respondents to the ROA input form participate in are similar to the results of the random sample of Northwoods Region residents generated by the SCORP survey.

The three activities noted by the SCORP survey that were not among the popular activities identified by ROA respondents are: target firearm shooting, hunting big game and hunting turkey, waterfowl and small game. For reasons that are unclear, the department did not receive input in the Northwoods ROA from as many hunters as could have been expected, given the large number of people that hunt in the Northwoods Region and the importance that big-game hunting plays in the region’s social framework and economy.

### Popular recreation activities in which respondents participated

#### ATV/UTV riding

Bicycling – paved trails

Bicycling – mountain biking, single track

Camping – tent

#### Canoeing/kayaking

#### Cross-country skiing/ snowshoeing

**Fishing – from a boat, canoe or kayak**

**Fishing – from shore**

**Fishing – ice fishing**

**Harvesting berries, mushrooms, etc.**

**Hiking, walking, running on trails**

**Motorboating**

**Snowmobiling**

**Swimming**

**Wildlife/bird watching**

## Properties that people visit

With almost 40% of the Northwoods Region in public ownership, opportunities to participate in a range of outdoor activities abound. Of the people that submitted the input form, almost two-thirds had visited the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in the last three years; making it the most frequently visited property among this group. The nine County Forests in the region were also very popular among respondents. The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, the largest state-owned property in Wisconsin, is also a popular destination with about two in five respondents having visited the property in the last three years.

## Factors important in determining favorite places to visit

Of the people providing input, the majority (64%) selected the quality of trails as one of the top three most important factors in determining their favorite property to visit. This is expected, given that many respondents noted their participation in a variety of motorized and non-motorized trail activities. In decreasing order, the next five most important factors are: (1) the desire to be in a quiet place, (2) good maps, signs, or information about the property, (3) the quality of the habitat, (4) the likelihood of seeing or harvesting fish and/or wildlife, and (5) the anticipation that the property will not be crowded. Although uncrowded scenarios and quiet experiences are somewhat different, they both speak to the desire of many respondents to seek out places that provide a respite from the noise and distractions of daily life. This wish was also articulated in many of the written comments received.

## Additional outdoor recreation opportunities needed

Nearly three-quarters of respondents believe that more recreational opportunities are needed in the Northwoods Region. Of the additional opportunities desired by respondents, four out of the top five choices selected were trail-related. Again, this speaks to the respondent’s participation in a variety of trail activities. The opportunity that was most frequently selected as needed in the Northwoods Region was more trails for motorized recreation, which was selected by almost half of respondents.

The recent SCORP survey of statewide residents found a correlation between the activities that people pursue and their perspectives on what additional opportunities are needed in their home county. For many activities, participants generally believed there was a need for more opportunities.

The public input received as part of the ROA showed a similar pattern in the Northwoods Region. For example, slightly more than half (53%) of mountain bikers believe there is a need for more mountain biking trails in the Northwoods. Similarly, 60% of horseback riders think there is a need for more equestrian trails in the region. Although only 38% of people who participate in hiking, walking, or running on trails in the region believe there is a need for more trails, given the large number of people that participate in those activities, the need for more hiking, walking, or running trails was the second most frequently noted need in the region.

The group that most frequently noted a need for more opportunities in the region was people who participate in motorized recreation. About 80% of respondents that participate in either ATV/UTV or off-road motorcycle riding believe more trails for motorized recreation are needed in the Northwoods Region. Of the people who believe that more motorized recreation trails are needed in the Northwoods, 95% participate in either ATV/UTV or off-road motorcycle riding. This is consistent with SCORP survey results that show a significantly higher need for motorized recreation trails in the northern and western parts of the state.

For respondents who participate in big game hunting in the Northwoods Region, substantially more believe that larger populations of big game species (e.g., deer and bear) are needed, rather than more lands open to public hunting (40% to 24%). For hunters as a group, their top selection for future needs was more trails for motorized recreation.

## Department-managed roads and motorized access

Of the topics and activities that the department sought comments on as part of the ROA, none garnered more interest than the future use of department roads in the Northwoods Region. Over 1,800 miles of roads exist on department roads in the Northwoods Region, most of which are active or former logging roads maintained for different levels and types of use.

About one-third (580 miles) of these roads are open to the public to drive “street-legal vehicles” (this includes cars, pick-up trucks, SUVs, motorcycles, and other licensed vehicles). By state law, these roads are also open to horses, horse-drawn vehicles, and bicycles. Several local units of government in the Northwoods Region have authorized some types of motorized recreational vehicles on designated local roads.

The department sought public feedback on potentially opening up none, some, or all department roads that are currently open to “street-legal” vehicles in the Northwoods Region to motorized recreation vehicles.<sup>2</sup> Responses were about evenly split between these three choices with about 34% supporting opening all roads, 30% supporting opening some roads for some purposes, and 36% supporting keeping roads closed to motorized recreational use. Of the respondents in favor of opening some roads, about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> supported opening roads during the fall hunting season (September 1 to December 31) while about 2/3<sup>rd</sup> supported opening roads that would enable connections to regional motorized trail networks.

**Top 10 most frequently identified recreation opportunities needed in the Northwoods Region, based on public input gathered during the ROA process**

Activity	# of responses
More trails for motorized recreation (ATVs, UTVs, off-road motorcycles, etc.)	883
More hiking/walking/running trails	684
More natural surface (dirt) bicycling trails	509
More rustic/quiet campgrounds (pit toilets, no electricity or generators)	493
More paved bicycling trails	422
Larger populations of big game species (deer, bear)	394
More public shore access to lakes & streams	352
More developed campgrounds (electric hook-ups, flush toilets, showers)	319
Larger populations of turkey, waterfowl, small game species	263
More lands open to public hunting	257

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of the ROA, “recreational vehicles” includes off highway vehicles, ATVs, UTVs, and off highway motorcycles.

The support or opposition to opening department-managed roads that are currently open to “street-legal” vehicles in the Northwoods Region to motorized recreation vehicles was correlated with the activities in which people participate.

From the comments submitted on the input forms it is clear that many respondents felt strongly for or against opening department-managed roads to motorized recreational uses. Of the people opposed to opening up roads, many stated concerns about noise, dust, impacts to wildlife, and damage to areas that can occur when vehicles don’t stay on designated routes. And for some respondents, the reason they live in or visit the region is the large expanses of undeveloped forests and quiet setting. For them, providing additional opportunities for motorized recreation contradicts the reason they are drawn to the area. Concern was also expressed that incorporating more motorized uses in the Northwoods Region would drive away “silent sport” enthusiasts.

A number of people in favor of opening up roads stated a desire to simply be able to use the same roads that are open to “street-legal” vehicles. Many supporters of opening forest roads to motorized recreational vehicles noted that the impacts from recreational vehicles were not any greater (and possibly less) than pick-up trucks or SUVs. In addition, some commenters expressed interest in attracting more motorized recreationists to the region as a way to enhance the local economy.

### *INPUT GATHERED AS PART OF THE WISCONSIN SCORP.*

In 2016 as part of the development of the SCORP, the department asked a random sample of Wisconsin residents to identify additional outdoor recreation opportunities needed in their home county. The most frequently identified needs statewide were:

- hiking/walking/running trails
- bicycling trails
- public shore access to lakes, rivers, and streams
- public shooting ranges
- local parks and playgrounds.

Respondents living in the nine counties in the Northwoods Region identified the following activities at a substantially higher rate than the state average:

- public boat launches
- trails for motorized recreation
- hunting opportunities.

Northwoods residents identified two activities considerably less frequently than the state average:

- ball fields
- local parks and playgrounds.

## FUTURE RECREATION NEEDS IN THE NORTHWOODS REGION

The Northwoods Region has an abundance of existing opportunities for most types of outdoor recreation, as evidenced in part by the large number of visitors the region receives each year. These opportunities are related to the large public land ownership in the region. Even with the large existing supply of opportunities the public identified a number of future recreation needs. The public also expressed strong support to leverage existing opportunities to provide better and more recreational experiences for residents and visitors.

The department used the following sources to identify which recreation opportunities are most needed in the region:

- Public input on recreation needs submitted during the comment period (April 10 to May 6, 2017).
- Data on recreation participation and needs gathered in a 2016 survey as part of the development of the 2017-2022 SCORP.
- Data gathered in previous SCORP planning efforts.

From this information, department staff grouped the relative needs for recreation activities as high, medium or low. The groupings are as follows:

<b>Future recreation needs in the Northwoods Region - High</b>	<b>Future recreation needs in the Northwoods Region - Medium</b>	<b>Future recreation needs in the Northwoods Region - Low</b>
ATV/UTV riding Bicycling - bicycle touring/road riding Bicycling - mountain biking/off-road biking Camping - developed Camping - primitive Canoeing or kayaking Fishing - lake fishing from a boat, canoe, or kayak Fishing - lake fishing from shore or a pier Fishing - stream or river fishing from shore or wading Four-wheel vehicle driving Hiking, walking, trail running, backpacking Hunting - big game Off-highway motorcycle riding Participating in nature-based education programs Snowmobiling	Bicycling - fat tire/snow biking Bird or wildlife watching Cross country skiing Fishing - ice fishing Horseback riding Hunting - migratory birds Hunting - small game Hunting - turkey Motorboating (waterski/tubing, personal watercraft) Nature photography Sailing, windsurfing, rowing, stand-up paddling Swimming in lakes and rivers Target shooting - archery Target shooting - firearms	Dog sledding/skijoring Dog training Dog trialing Dog walking Fishing - river fishing from a boat, canoe, or kayak Gather mushrooms, berries, etc. Geocaching Horse cart driving Picnicking Rock climbing Scuba diving/snorkeling Snowshoeing Trapping Visiting a beach, beach walking Whitewater rafting

## OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET FUTURE RECREATION NEEDS IN THE NORTHWOODS REGION ON DEPARTMENT-MANAGED LANDS

On behalf of Wisconsin residents, the department owns and manages properties in the Northwoods Region to meet a variety of ecological and recreation goals. These properties provide a range of settings and experiences – from developed sites with flush toilets and hot showers to remote places that provide wilderness settings. At some properties in the Northwoods, most notably the NHAL State Forest, a wealth of recreation opportunities is currently provided. At other properties, recreation plays a secondary role in their purpose.

Applying the regional needs listed above, the department evaluated the properties it manages in the Northwoods Region to identify places where it could potentially incorporate some activities or enhance existing opportunities to meet these needs. The identification of department-managed lands that appear to be “good fits” to provide different activities will be used by the department to help focus the department’s work developing and updating property master plans. A description of opportunities to meet recreation needs in the Northwoods Region (on department-managed lands) follows.

### **Cooperatively Managed Trails**

It should be noted that the department owns several state trails in the region. However, some of these trails are cooperatively managed by local governments, usually counties. In these partnerships, the department typically holds the land ownership while the partners develop, maintain and operate the trail. Also, the managing partner conducts planning processes to determine which recreational uses will be allowed on the property. Since use decisions are planned by the trail partners, cooperatively managed trails will not be listed below as potential “good fits” in this analysis. However, the information collected will be provided to the partners for their use in future planning efforts. For the Western Sands Region, cooperatively managed trails include:

- Nicolet State Trail

## *NON-MOTORIZED TRAIL RECREATION*

Non-motorized trail recreation has been and continues to be a primary outdoor activity throughout the year in the Northwoods. From hiking and biking in the summer to cross-country skiing in the winter, the region’s residents and visitors take advantage of the numerous opportunities that currently exist.

The construction of paved biking trails through the NHAL State Forest, a cooperative project between the department and the local communities, has become a significant draw for visitors and residents of all ages. Linking cities and villages to each other and to campgrounds has helped create a new experience for campers and has increased economic activity in the area. Department staff observations suggest that about half of campers at the NHAL State Forest campgrounds linked to this trail system now bring bikes with them.

Participation in mountain biking has also grown recently in the region and demand exists for trails suitable for a variety of skill levels. As opposed to recreational bicycling, where there are benefits to creating multiple connecting linkages, meeting the growing need for mountain biking and off-road biking opportunities can be created or expanded at multiple, stand-alone sites throughout the region. Mountain biking trails are constructed, narrow trails less than two feet wide.

Several department properties, including the NHAL State Forest and several of the larger State Wildlife Areas that have sizeable amounts of uplands, provide excellent opportunities to expand existing bicycle trail networks or create new ones. Opportunities also exist to connect bicycle trails on department properties with adjoining public properties and bicycle routes.

Hiking, walking and running on trails in the region remains very popular activities. Many opportunities exist on department properties throughout the region. Trails near population centers are likely to be most frequently used.

Reflecting the amount of snow the region receives, the long winter season, and the quality of the trails, the region has long been a draw for cross-country skiing. Most skiing now occurs on groomed trails. If other areas of the state receive less snow in the future, the Northwoods Region may draw even more cross-country skiers. There are many opportunities on department properties to expand groomed trail networks or create new ones.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for non-motorized trail activities

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add this use</b>
<b>Bicycling - bicycle touring/road riding</b>	Northern Highland American Legion State Forest	Bearskin State Trail Little Rice Wildlife Area Public access sites on lakes and rivers Turtle Flambeau Scenic Waters Area Upper Wolf River Fishery Area	Pine Popple Wild Rivers Pershing Wildlife Area Powell Marsh Wildlife Area	
<b>Bicycling - mountain biking/off-road biking</b>	Menard Island Resource Area Northern Highland American Legion State Forest Upper Wolf River Fishery Area Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area	Bearskin State Trail Bog Brook Wildlife Area Cranberry Lake Fishery Area Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area	Ackley Wildlife Area Bill Cross Wildlife Area Conover Rearing Station Hay Creek-Hoffman Lake Wildlife Area Ice Age Trail property Kimberly Clark Wildlife Area Mercer Lake Fishery Area New Wood Wildlife Area Niebauer Springs Fishery Area Peters Marsh Wildlife Area Rib River Fishery Area Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area Spring Creek Wildlife Area Tamarack Rearing Station Thunder Lake Wildlife Area Turtle Flambeau Scenic Waters Area	
<b>Hiking, walking, trail running, backpacking</b>	All department properties are open to hiking, although most fishery, wildlife and natural areas do not have designated trails. Designated trails are found on state park, trail, forest, and flowage properties. Nearly all department properties have opportunities to add at least some designated hiking/ running/backpacking trails.			

## *MOTORIZED TRAIL RECREATION*

The department primarily provides two types of motorized access in the Northwoods Region: (1) access for street-legal vehicles on over 580 miles of roads it maintains for public use (most of which are access roads for logging operations and are surface with native soils) and (2) trails and routes for ATV/UTVs and snowmobiles.

The department conducts frequent forestry operations throughout the region. Following the harvest of trees from a site, the department typically leaves the logging access roads open to the public for a couple of years (in many cases there is public interest in harvesting firewood from the residual tree branches). In situations where there are sensitive resources or other factors that suggest continued public access on the road is not compatible with long-term goals, these logging roads will be closed. In other cases, where there are no compelling reasons to close the road to continued public use by street-legal vehicles, they will remain open. Many visitors to the Northwoods Region use these roads to access portions of department-managed properties to engage in hunting, fishing, berry picking, and a variety of other activities including pleasure driving.

The department does not believe there is public interest or a need to close substantial portions of the existing open roads to meet broad-based ecological or recreational needs. There may be a need to close stretches of the existing open road network on department lands due to specific situations. These instances will be identified and addressed in subsequent master planning processes.

There is considerable interest in also using the network of open forest roads for ATV/UTV and off highway motorcycle use, both as a riding experience and to enable connections of the larger regional network of routes. More and more towns are allowing ATV/UTVs on their local roads and, as such, there are increasing opportunities to make connections across department-managed lands to help facilitate this network.

Based on public input received during the development of the Northwoods ROA, there appears to be diverse opinions on the desirability of providing more ATV/UTV access on the roads that the department maintains for street-legal vehicles. While many people support providing some access for recreational motorized vehicles on roads open to street-legal vehicles, there is also vocal opposition to this use.

The department recognizes that motorized recreational uses, particularly those that occur in warm-weather months, are a contentious issue. The department currently allows ATV/UTVs to be ridden on some roads on some properties in the Northwoods Region. The department's experience is that this use can disrupt other users of the properties, but typically not in a manner or to an extent that it noticeably affects visitation patterns or drives non-motorized users away. It is also the department's experience that some illegal use occurs (most often in the form of riders leaving designated routes) but that these instances tend to be relatively minor (if ongoing) issues that can be successfully addressed through education and monitoring by clubs, and enforcement.

Given the size, location, and distribution of the department-owned properties in the region, it seems reasonable that some motorized recreational use, both to make connections and to provide access to portions of the larger properties during the fall hunting season, can be incorporated at some or many of the properties listed in the table beginning on page 25. It is the department's expectation that motorized recreational use can be established or expanded at properties in ways that minimize adverse impacts to neighbors, sensitive places and resources, existing recreational use patterns, and other considerations. The specific properties and portions of properties for motorized recreational use will be determined in the property master planning process.

### *a) ATV/UTV riding*

The department maintains both ATV/UTV trails and routes (roads that are open to both street-legal vehicles and ATV/UTVs) on some properties in the Northwoods Region. There is a growing demand for riding opportunities that has resulted in an increasing number of towns allowing ATV/UTVs on local roads by designating them as routes. The increased number of opportunities has in turn helped create increased demand.

Most ATV/UTV riders prefer trails or routes that are winding and narrower rather than straight and wide. However, local roads (even if they are straight and wide) that provide a connection from one desirable setting to another is generally considered an acceptable riding experience.

The department believes there are three potential options for ATV/UTV riding on properties it manages in the Northwoods Region. First, there is an opportunity to provide connections to the regional network of trails and routes using a combination of existing local (town) roads and department-managed roads. Opening town roads that pass through department properties to ATV/UTV use will require the town governments to authorize this use. Of the department-managed roads, there are opportunities to use both those that are currently open to street-legal vehicles and those currently closed to public use. Given the wet nature of many seasonally-open roads (these are mostly in wet areas that are only open during the winter when the ground is frozen, typically for snowmobiling), it appears there are only limited stretches where these roads could provide ATV/UTV riding opportunities.

Second, an opportunity exists to provide ATV/UTV riders with access to department-managed roads during the fall hunting season (generally September 1 through January 31) that are already open to street-legal vehicles. This would enable these riders to access areas of the property where visitors currently can drive their pick-up trucks, SUVs, and other vehicles.

A third option would be to allow ATV/UTV access to all or most roads currently open to street-legal vehicles and to identify and sign preferred routes of travel. This would concentrate riding on a subset of routes while also allowing riders the flexibility to access or explore many parts of department-managed lands. This may be problematic where department roads connect to roads not under the authority of the department and not already open to ATV/UTV use.

#### *b) Off-highway motorcycle riding*

There are two types of off-highway motorcycles – those that are street-legal (that is, they are licensed, plated, and have required safety features such as brake lights, rearview mirror, and turn signals) and those that are not. Street-legal motorcycles that are also designed for off-road use are commonly called dual-sport motorcycles. These motorcycles are currently allowed on all public roads on department properties. Off-highway motorcycles that are not licensed and street-legal (typically these motorcycles are lighter weight, have high ground clearance, and knobby tires) are not currently allowed on department roads.

Although preferred riding experiences are narrow, winding trails that meander through the forest, primitive roads (2-tracks) can provide high-quality rides. As with ATV/UTVs, routes (even wide and straight) are acceptable ways to connect higher-quality riding experiences.

Since dual-sport motorcycles are already allowed on all open department roads, to provide increased riding opportunities would require opening more roads to street-legal vehicles or to open them just to motorcycles. Identifying and signing preferred routes of travel may both concentrate use in the most appropriate corridors while also encouraging more use.

#### *c) Off-highway vehicle driving*

Off-highway, four-wheel drive vehicle drivers prefer a variety of experiences. Some like to climb and descend technically challenging hills that test their maneuverability and driving skills. Others like to drive on hilly, winding primitive roads exploring the forests and countryside. Of course, many drivers enjoy both types of experiences. Some four-wheel drive trucks are street-legal (that is, they have license plates and all the required safety features) while others are not. Four-wheel drive vehicles that are not street-legal are not allowed on public roads.

*d) Snowmobiling*

Snowmobiling occurs extensively on department-managed lands. Although there may be some opportunities to expand, the most common need is simply to ensure that the trails on department properties are aligned with those of the broader regional network.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for motorized trail activities.

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand</b> this use	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add</b> this use
<b>ATV/UTV riding</b>	Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area	Alta Springs Fishery Area Bog Brook Wildlife Area Eau Claire River Fishery Area Evergreen River Fishery Area Little Rice Wildlife Area Pine Popple Wild Rivers Prairie River Fishery Area Rabes Lake Fishery Area Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area Underwood Wildlife Area Upper Wolf River Fishery Area Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area Woods Flowage Fishery Area	Bearskin State Trail Menard Island Resource Area Northern Highland American Legion State Forest Public access sites on lakes and rivers Turtle Flambeau Scenic Waters Area	Big Rib River Fishery Area Spring Lake Fishery Area
<b>4-WD vehicle driving</b>		Bog Brook Wildlife Area Hay Creek-Hoffman Lake Wildlife Area Kimberly Clark Wildlife Area Northern Highland American Legion State Forest Pine Popple Wild Rivers Powell Marsh Wildlife Area Spring Creek Wildlife Area Underwood Wildlife Area Upper Wolf River Fishery Area Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area	Bearskin State Trail	Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area
<b>Off-highway motorcycle riding</b>	Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area	Pine Popple Wild Rivers Upper Wolf River Fishery Area	Bearskin State Trail Northern Highland American Legion State Forest	Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area
<b>Snowmobiling</b>	Hundreds of miles of snowmobile trail, maintained by local clubs, cross department lands as part of the extensive network of trails in the region. Although there are some opportunities to expand the existing network of trails, generally the existing trails on department lands meets the existing demand.			

## *OTHER FORMS OF RECREATION*

In addition to trail-based activities, there is considerable demand for many other types of outdoor recreation in the Northwoods Region, including camping, hunting and fishing, and a variety of types of boating.

Camping was one of the area's early draws and remains one of the region's most popular activities. Camping has evolved over the years and there has been a shift in demand both for more developed and rustic experiences. The department currently provides a range of camping opportunities from primitive, isolated sites with only a fire ring and box latrine to densely grouped campgrounds with flush toilets and hot showers. The only camp sites with electric hook-ups on department properties within the Northwoods Region are located at Council Grounds State Park.

Although many of the department's campgrounds are full on summer weekends, most are only partially at capacity during the week and in the spring and fall. Many campers now bring gasoline generators to provide electricity for their stay. There is potential on department properties to provide more camping opportunities with electric hook-ups to meet the growing demand. Converting some entire campgrounds (or significant portions) to provide electric hook-ups would likely be most cost-effective for the department and would likely allow the campgrounds to operate at a higher capacity over longer periods of the year.

Providing electricity at some campgrounds would also relieve the need for campers to run generators and thus could provide an opportunity to expand the quiet experiences that other campers' desire. There are also opportunities on several department properties to create new or expand existing rustic or primitive campsites or camping experiences.

Given the abundance of lakes, streams and rivers in the region, fishing and boating have long been among the most popular outdoor activities here. Although there are many existing boat launches (both sites that accommodate trailers with motorboats as well as carry-in access for canoes and kayaks) there are several opportunities for additional access sites on underserved lakes on department properties to meet the demand.

Big game hunting is a popular activity in the Northwoods Region and an important contributor to the local economy in the fall when most other visitors have left. An abundance of land open to the public for hunting in the region already exists, but there are opportunities to provide easier access into more remote areas for big-game hunters.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for other forms of recreation.

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add this use</b>
<b>Camping – developed (modern)</b>	Northern Highland American Legion State Forest	Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area	Hay Creek-Hoffman Lake Wildlife Area Ice Age Trail property Kimberly Clark Wildlife Area Menard Island Resource Area Mercer Lake Springs Fishery Area Tamarack Rearing Station Upper Wolf River Fishery Area	
<b>Camping – rustic</b>	Northern Highland American Legion State Forest Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area	Ackley Wildlife Area New Wood Wildlife Area Peters Marsh Wildlife Area Pine Popple Wild Rivers Turtle Flambeau Scenic Waters Area Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area	Bill Cross Wildlife Area Hay Creek-Hoffman Lake Wildlife Area Ice Age Trail property Kimberly Clark Wildlife Area Menard Island Resource Area Mercer Lake Springs Fishery Area Pershing Wildlife Area Spring Creek Wildlife Area Tamarack Rearing Station Underwood Wildlife Area Upper Wolf River Fishery Area	
<b>Hunting - big game</b>	Big game hunting is allowed on all department properties outside of designated use areas (e.g., campgrounds, picnic areas, parking lots, and some designated trails). Since hunting occurs through department lands, there are not opportunities to expand the places where this activity can occur. There are, however, ways that the department can provide easier access into remote areas and can encourage more people to participate in hunting on department-managed lands in the Northwoods Region. There is an abundance of land open to the public for big game hunting.			
<b>Participating in nature-based education programs</b>	A few department properties in the Northwoods Region host formal nature-based education programs. Generally, there are opportunities for Friends groups, education institutions or others to expand or add nature-based programs on the larger department properties.			
<b>Canoeing or kayaking</b>	Although not every property with open water has formal boat access sites (or access sites on all waterbodies) many of the lakes, rivers, and larger streams on department-managed lands have some opportunities to carry in a canoe or kayak. There are potentially many opportunities to add more walk-in trails to access waterbodies with canoes or kayaks.			

<b>Fishing - lake fishing from a boat, canoe, or kayak</b>	The department currently maintains improved boat launches throughout the region. Some of the larger properties with many or large waterbodies, such as the NHAL State Forest and the flowages, have many places to launch a trailered boat. On other lakes and rivers, the department has acquired small properties to support boat launches. The properties with potential to add more improved boat access sites (ramps for trailered boats) include: Crystal Springs Rearing Station, Menard Island Resource Area, Mercer lake Springs Fishery Area, NHAL State Forest, Powell Marsh Wildlife Area, Turtle Flambeau Scenic Waters Area, Upper Wolf River Fishery Area, and Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area
<b>Fishing - lake fishing from shore or a pier</b>	All department lands with lakes are open to shore fishing and as such there are not opportunities to expand this opportunity. There are some fishing docks or piers on department lands and there are some opportunities to add new ones, particularly at those properties near cities and villages and with easy road access.
<b>Fishing - stream or river fishing from shore or wading</b>	All department lands with streams or rivers are open to shore fishing and as such there are not opportunities to expand this opportunity at existing properties. There may be opportunities to expand shore fishing opportunities through the acquisition of key parcels.

## SUMMARY OF THE NORTHWOODS REGION ROA

With a wealth of public conservation lands, the Northwoods Region has been an outdoor recreation destination for generations of families dating back to Wisconsin's earliest days. A wide range of recreation opportunities are currently provided in the region, from quiet wilderness areas and no-motor lakes to modern campgrounds with hot showers to developed mountain biking trails and thousands of miles of snowmobile trails.

Although the region is rich in current opportunities, a number of needs were expressed by residents. Topping the list of needs are: trails for motorized recreational vehicles, trails for hiking, walking and running, trails for bicycling, and rustic camping. Although there was strong demand for these facilities, there was also vocal opposition to some of these, notably motorized recreation. At heart, much of the opposition to allowing motorized recreation, bicycle trails, and other forms of recreation was based on a desire to "keep things the way they are."

The department believes there are opportunities to meet many of the desired recreational experiences on some of the properties it manages in the Northwoods Region. In particular, the department believes the following properties and property groups are well-suited to provide the identified needs in the region:

### *NORTHERN HIGHLAND AMERICAN LEGION STATE FOREST*

- Paved bicycle trails that expand the existing network linking cities and villages and campgrounds and provide modest length loop riding opportunities (3 to 15 miles).
- Mountain biking trails that expand existing opportunities and create new destinations. These trails could provide single-track, constructed trails of varying difficulties (including potentially skills areas).
- ATV/UTV riding on forest roads that are already currently open to street-legal vehicles to provide linkages in regional trail/route networks and to provide access during the fall hunting season.
- Off-highway motorcycle riding on forest roads that are already currently open to street-legal vehicles to provide linkages in regional trail/route networks.
- Developed camping, including adding electrified sites to some campgrounds or significant portions of campgrounds.
- Primitive camping, including prohibiting use of generators at some campgrounds to provide quiet settings.
- Group campgrounds.
- A limited number of additional boat launches at strategic locations to facilitate access to key waters.

### *STATE WILDLIFE AREAS, FISHERY AREAS, REARING STATIONS, AND NATURAL AREAS*

- Hiking/walking/running loop trails of varying lengths. Properties in proximity to cities and villages likely would be most popular.
- Some limited opportunities to provide mountain biking trails (single-track, constructed trails of varying difficulties) on some of the larger properties with upland habitats.
- ATV/UTV riding and motorcycle riding on existing open roads (and potentially staff management roads) that connect regional trail/route networks.
- Some limited opportunities to provide primitive and rustic camping opportunities, along with potentially a few more developed sites.
- Additional boat launches at strategic locations to facilitate access to key waters.

### *FLOWAGES (SCENIC WATERS AREAS)*

- Hiking/walking/running loop trails of varying lengths. Properties in proximity to cities and villages likely would be most popular.
- ATV/UTV riding and motorcycle riding on existing open roads (and potentially service roads) that connect regional trail/route networks.
- Some limited opportunities to provide mountain biking trails (narrow single-track, constructed trails of varying difficulties).
- Opportunities to provide more primitive and rustic camping opportunities.

### *STATE PARKS AND TRAILS*

- There are opportunities on all three state trails in the Northwoods Region to allow or expand ATV/UTV riding and motorcycle riding opportunities to help connect regional trail/route networks. However, it must be noted that, with the exception of the Bearskin State Trail, all State Trails in the Northwoods Region are cooperatively managed with the respective counties. Allowed uses on these trails are determined by the counties and not the department.
- Some options to add to the existing camping and bicycling opportunities at Council Grounds State Park.

